Towards an inclusive education: A comparative longitudinal study

A study of the education of refugee and national children in Lebanon, Turkey and Australia

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AUSTRALIA REPORT 2020
ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report presents the findings from the first wave of data collection for an ongoing comparative and longitudinal study entitled “My Future Five Years From Now”, funded by Lyle Spencer foundation.

This five-year study led by the Centre for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University in collaboration with partners abroad, examines the relationship between contexts of refugee asylum, education policies and education outcomes across three national contexts: Lebanon, Australia, and Turkey.

This report presents the findings from the first round of data collection in Australia in 2018-2019 academic year.

All reported findings are statistically significant (at the 5% level), unless stated otherwise.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

“My Future Five Years From Now” is a mixed methods study. The study uses policy analysis, interviews, survey data and observational data to gain rich and varied insights into the educational provisions made for national and refugee students. Mixed methods data offers rich and varied perspectives on complex educational phenomena and supports the triangulation of data.

Data was collected during the 2018/19 academic year from 442 students that cater to students with Australian citizenship (Australian nationals) with the majority of these students coming from migrant backgrounds and from refugee students who had been forcibly displaced from Arab speaking countries. The schools in the sample were located in 9 districts in Australia.

Survey data was analyzed using Stata statistical analysis software.

The survey asked students about their living and socio-economic conditions, their education performance and psychosocial well-being. Additional questions were asked to refugee students to better understand their experiences before, during and immediately after their arrival to Australia. Our analysis focused on examining the reported differences between displaced and national students across the various phenomena captured in the survey. Because we used convenience sampling, the results we reported here cannot be generalized. Rather they were indicative of the ways in which legal status and policy environments shape the education experiences of vulnerable Australian and refugee students.

Approved by The Institutional Review Board of the Lebanese American University

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AUSTRALIA REPORT
Since 1977, Australia has operated a Refugee and Humanitarian Program (Government of Australia, n.d.). The program has two main components: offshore and onshore. The offshore component is for persons in need of humanitarian protection who would like to pursue resettlement in Australia but who currently live outside of Australia. The onshore component is for persons who are already within the jurisdiction of Australia but who fear persecution or significant harm if they return to their home country. In such cases people can apply to remain in Australia through a protection visa scheme. According to the Department of Home Affairs, the program has been designed to ensure Australia’s effective response to global humanitarian conditions and to ensure that support services are in place for entrants into the country.

The difference between the offshore and onshore components of Australia’s refugee regime manifests in one of the most controversial aspects of Australia’s treatment of persons seeking international protection under the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention: its establishment of offshore detention centers in Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea to process asylum seekers’ refugee claims. Australia is the only country in the world to use such a system. The offshore system has been subject to significant criticism from human rights campaigners owing to the inhumane and often abusive conditions in these centers, the prolonged and indefinite periods of detention, the high costs of such a project and, claims that it results in the transfer of responsibilities to less equipped countries (Cave, 2019; Refugee Council of Australia, 2016).

Notwithstanding the need for research that examines the conditions and implications of the offshore centers, this country brief deals only with refugees who have been accepted for resettlement in Australia. Statistics from 2018 show that 56,933 persons were designated for resettlement in Australia, including 12,706 who had been accepted that calendar year. These figures include people who have been granted permanent protection and temporary protection visas but exclude people who have completed the refugee resettlement process. Based on these figures Australia ranks third globally for resettlement behind Canada and the United States (Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).
EDUCATION PROVISIONS FOR REFUGEES

School-aged children who were part of the resettlement program were enrolled in government schools. Although each state oversees education policies, the provision of education is governed by the Australian Education Act 2013.

Schooling is compulsory for children aged 6-16, from primary to secondary school years. **Public schools** - also referred to as government schools - are **tuition-free** although there are sometimes costs associated with excursions, sporting events and other in-school activities. **Independent and Catholic schools** (non-government schools) **require tuition fees** from students, although the Australian government still provides some funding for these schools.

However, apart from the implementation of a national curriculum and multicultural education that recognizes a culturally diverse and inclusive Australia, there is no overarching Australian government policy for students from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. Instead it is up to the education departments of each state to set policies and decide on programs and activities for refugee education.

Public schools are tuition-free. Independent and Catholic schools (non-government schools) require tuition fees from students.
99% of national students reported living in an independent residence, compared to 66% of refugee students. This suggests that there is a relationship between housing conditions and respondent status, whereby refugees were more housing insecure.

Interestingly however, nationals reported a higher percentage of people living in one house as opposed to displaced students. Housing conditions can be an indicator of socio-economic status and here it seems displaced students were better off than nationals when it comes to the number of people under one roof. Reasons for this could be related to the composition of the sample, Australia’s provision of social services or perhaps, that not all family members were able to relocate to Australia, resulting in fewer people per household.

The refugees in the sample tended to live in communities where there were other refugees (56% of students in our sample reported this). However, 68% of displaced students reported attachment to their neighborhoods, compared to 72% of nationals, suggesting that nationals feel more attached to their neighborhoods.

There was also a slight, but nevertheless statistically significant difference in how safe students felt in their neighborhoods. 84% of displaced students in the sample reported feeling safe in their neighborhoods as opposed to 86% of nationals.

Additionally, the top three reasons displaced students reported for relocating several times were the houses they lived in were too small, the school district/school was too far and that the house was in bad condition.
Children from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESBs) take English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) classes. This includes children from refugee backgrounds. The EALD is a component of the Australian Curriculum specifically developed to allow NESB and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students to equitably access Standard Australian English. Additional language provisions are available at the state level including through vocational education opportunities offered to older children and youth.

There is a stark contrast between reported understanding of the language of instruction for Australian nationals versus refugee students in our sample.

In short, refugee students in our sample experienced significant difficulties in English and were at a disadvantage compared to their national peers.

Language of instruction remains a key challenge facing refugees and affecting their education attainment.
FAMILY SUPPORTS

On a positive note, 62% of refugee students reported that their parents communicated frequently with teachers compared to 52% of nationals. This relationship was however, statistically insignificant, which suggests that refugee students were not at a disadvantage when it comes to parents communicating with their teachers.

EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

We also observed discrepancies between the classroom-based experiences of refugee students compared to host state nationals. 40% of refugee students reported difficulties focusing in class compared to 13% of nationals. This may be related to language difficulties.

Indicative of this we observed a statistically significant positive correlation between the difficulties that students experienced with the local language and their ability to focus in class. Reflective of the difficulties refugee students faced in the classroom, only 47% of displaced students reported that they believe their performance was very good or good and that their school teachers are supportive. This compared to 72% of nationals who reported this.

However, the relationship between supportive teachers and education performance was only statistically significant for refugee students, which highlights the particularly important role that teachers play for these students.

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In our sample, **83% of displaced students reported feeling welcomed in Australia.** Oftentimes displaced students can feel out of place in a new country, and **13% of displaced students report experiencing hostility at school as opposed to 4% of nationals.**[1]

Performance at school can be related to whether students experience hostility in that environment or not, and in our sample, **41% of displaced students reported not experiencing hostility along with performing well in school** (as opposed to **72% of nationals**). This suggests a relationship between hostility at school and educational performance particularly for displaced students.

Displaced students reported that the top 3 groups of people from whom they experienced hostility from were national students, refugee students, and people in their neighborhood. In terms of opportunities, **87% of displaced students reported that they believe the school system offers equal opportunities, as opposed to 81% of nationals.** This however, is statistically insignificant which means we do not see a relationship between perceptions of equal opportunity and respondent status. **92% of displaced students reported they were likely to befriend nationals, whereas 86% of nationals reported this.** This was also statistically insignificant, which suggests that displaced students were just as likely to befriend nationals. This could ease the process of assimilation with their peers more. Finally, **32% of displaced students reported friendlier/somewhat friendlier relationships with the locals and having very good/good educational performance, whereas 51% of nationals reported this.**

[1] Statistically significant at the 10 percent level

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**References**


